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Fire and Ice: The Traditional Heroine in *The Silmarillion*

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Abstract

Defines the Light and Dark heroine, each of which may have a positive or negative aspect. Sees Finduilas and Nienor Níniel as negative, non-active, acted upon; Lúthien and Idril participate “in the course of their heroes’ actions.”

Additional Keywords

Fair and dark ladies; Heroines; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Finduilas; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Idril; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Lúthien Tinúviel; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Niënor/Níniel; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Silmarillion

Fire and Ice

The Traditional Heroine in The Silmarillion

Sarah Beach

Introduction

Given the popularity of Jungian criticism, particularly in the genre of fantasy, one can find sufficient material on the Anima Figure. However, such studies do not delve very deeply into the Archetypes of heroines that are present in literature, particularly English literature. Of the archetypes that have been called the Fair and the Dark Ladies, there has been limited study.

Several years ago, in a column in *Mythlore*, I touched briefly on the matter of the Fair and the Dark Heroines. This was in regard to the difference between the significance of the Hero and the significance of the Heroine in the traditional fantasy tale. Referring to Joseph Campbell's study, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, I observed:

Campbell calls his perception of the Hero a "monomyth", which indicates a singular quality to the function of the Hero, no matter what personality is given the Hero. Campbell's study deals with the elements of the Hero's quest and its progress. By this we can determine that the Hero represents the quality of action. Using Rogers' observations [to be cited below], we can begin to perceive the quality represented by the Heroine, a quality which we might call the "essence". The Heroine usually represents for the Hero the essences of love or wisdom or socialization.¹

Often, the traditional Heroine is acted upon rather than initiating action. Also, given whether the tale is heading toward a happy or tragic ending, the Heroine may be a good or a bad influence on the course of the Hero's quest. Is she fair, or is she sinister? Thus, Robert Rogers, in *The Double in Literature*, writes

The blue-eyed, fair-haired, light-complexioned one is the Fair Maiden, alias the Persecuted Maiden, the Virgin, the Saint, the Pale Lady, The Good Woman, the Nice Girl, the Marriageable Young Lady. Sometimes she is simply known as Wife. Her darker counterpart is the Femme Fatale, alias the Temptress, the Vamp, the Sinner, the Dark Lady, the Bad Woman, the Naughty Girl, the Trollp. Sometimes she is called Mistress or Prostitute or Eve or Whore of Babylon, depending on circumstances.²

The possibilities are very limited by this perspective. What of the dark, passionate, but positive heroine? What of the ice-cold, but destructive, fair "heroine"? We need a more finely tuned paradigm than has been given us thus far.

I must confess some possible limits to what I am about to propose. It could be that the archetypes I am to describe are a feature of only the English tradition in literature. I am

not sufficiently conversant with literatures in other languages to make a determination. I include this caveat because I think it possible that the archetypes developed out of the English perception of two European (dare I say it?) stereotypes: that of the fair-colored, cool, intellectual Nordic type and the dark-colored, passionate Mediterranean type. However the pattern began, it has become a pattern, and one that affects the way Tolkien presents his Heroines.

Rogers' description is limited in presenting the Fair Heroine is positive and the Dark Heroine as negative. Although this is the usual pattern encountered, it is not the only one. One of the first chores is to determine additional characteristics of the Fair versus the Dark.

Our categorizing minds inevitably equate like with like, and so a fair coloring leads to a linkage with light itself, sunlight and the attendant qualities we attach to it: the "light of the mind," reason, and order. Likewise, with dark coloring, a linkage is made to the suspect nature of darkness, and things that occur in darkness: passion and chaos. Additionally, light and dark carry directional impulses: light moving upward, dark moving down. In his *Fables of Identity*, Northrop Frye speaks of these directions as

two points of particular significance in poetic symbolism. One is the point, usually the top of a mountain just below the moon, where the upper world and this one come into alignment, where we look up to the heavenly world and down in the turning cycle of nature. The other is the point, usually in a mysterious labyrinthine cave, where the lower world and this one come into alignment, where we look down to a world of pain and up to the turning cycle of nature.³

Therefore, let us construct our paradigm: the Fair Heroine, whose province is the upper realms where light and reason function; and the Dark Heroine, whose province is the lower realms where darkness and emotion function. Then let us add that both aspects have a negative and a positive version, a negative or a positive effect in the stories in which they appear. With this much defined, we can now turn to the use Tolkien makes of these archetypes.

In *The Silmarillion*, J.R.R. Tolkien presents four women, each of whom can serve as an example of one quarter of the Heroine paradigm. Though other women appear through out the work, the four under consideration here are Finduilas and Nienor Niníel, and Idril and Lúthien. Although Tolkien does not present out-and-out negative

(i.e., villainesses) female images (Ungoliant and Shelob being exceptions), two of these heroines present portraits of the Fair and Dark Heroines in their negative modes, those being Finduilas and Nienor Níniel. They are basically nonactive heroines, acted upon by the forces around the hero. Idril and Lúthien are positive versions of the Heroines, participating in the course of their heroes' actions.

The Negative Heroines

Finduilas stands as one figure in the torrential tragedy that whirls around Túrin Turambar. She is fair and cool-tempered. When Gwindor brings Túrin to Nargothrond, Tolkien gives this description:

but Finduilas daughter of Orodreth the King knew him [Gwindor] and welcomed him, for she had loved him before the Nírnaeth, and so greatly did Gwindor love her beauty that he named her Faelivrin, which is the gleam of the sun on the pools of Ivrin.⁴

There she is, the Fair Heroine, "the gleam of the sun on the pools of Ivrin." In the elaboration of the story that is included in *Unfinished Tales*, she is further described as "golden-haired after the manner of the house of Finarfin."⁵ Inevitably, love enters the picture, but in keeping with the rational rule of the Fair Heroine, Finduilas' response is far from a display of emotional pyrotechnics.

Then the heart of Finduilas was turned from Gwindor and against her will her love was given to Túrin; but Túrin did not perceive what had befallen. And being torn in heart Finduilas became sorrowful; and she grew wan and silent. (S, 210)

It is important to note that she comes to love the stranger "against her will," a quality of the intellect. And when she discovers that her love is unrequited, she keeps her own counsel, she is "silent."

She takes no action, even though a positive thing might have come as a result. Certainly, Gwindor, even in his envy, believes that such a result is possible. When Glaurung comes against Nargothrond, Gwindor is mortally wounded. Túrin carries him away from the battlefield, and Gwindor gives him a final charge:

... Haste thee to Nargothrond, and save Finduilas. And this last I say to thee: she stands between thee and thy doom. If thou fail her, it shall not fail to find thee. Farewell! (S, 213)

Gwindor, at least, believes in what the Fair Heroine represents. She is lightness to counter the darkness in Túrin's soul, reason to balance the emotional turmoil of his life.

Unfortunately, Túrin succumbs to the lies of Glaurung and does not immediately go to her aid. She is killed by the Orcs, impaled to a tree. She is found, before she dies, by men of Brethil. She gives them a message: 'Tell the Morwen that Finduilas is here.' (S, 216) They bury her there, and call the place "Haudh-en-Elleth, The Mound of the Elf-maid." (S, 216)

And there ends the course of Finduilas. For all the favorable aspects of the Fair Heroine, her passive response to the events around her, to the advent of love, assists in the destructive direction of Túrin's life.

Nienor serves as the negative Dark Heroine counterpart of Finduilas. Although nowhere in the story of Túrin in *The Silmarillion* is there a physical description of Nienor, she conforms to the pattern of the Dark Heroine. At birth, her mother "named her Nienor, which is Mourning." (S, 199) Surely, this is an emotion of darkness and not light.

Nienor, by way of being the Dark Heroine, is more active in her course than Finduilas. But this action is not positive, rather it springs from rashness and emotion. When Morwen leaves Menegroth to search for her son, Nienor

was bidden to remain behind. Yet the fearlessness of her house was hers; and in an evil hour, in hope that Morwen would return when she saw that her daughter would go with her into peril, Nienor disguised herself as one of Thingol's people, and went with that ill-fated riding. (S, 217)

Having acted rashly, she refuses to back down: when "the coming of Nienor was revealed ... despite Morwen's command she would not go back." (S, 217) Indeed, she often acts without forethought.

It is true that some of her actions can be ascribed to the spell Glaurung puts on her. When Mablung finds her shortly after her encounter with the dragon, their company is attacked by Orcs,

But Nienor in that hour recovered hearing and light, and being awakened by the cries of the orcs she sprang up in terror, and fled ere they could come to her. (S, 218)

In the passages that follow, Tolkien's descriptions of her reek of chaos and madness: "for she fled as in a madness of fear, swifter than a deer and tore off all her clothing as she ran," "therefore she went warily as a hunted beast," "in terror she cast herself down ... and she lay like a wild beast that is dying." (S, 219)

There are also references connecting Nienor (also called Níniel by Túrin Turambar) with darkness. After the encounter with Glaurung, "nothing did she remember save a darkness that lay behind her". (S, 219) When Turambar finds her,

as soon as she looked upon Turambar she was comforted, for it seemed to her that she had found at last something that she had sought in her darkness; and she would not be parted from him. (S, 219)

When he bestows the name of Níniel, "Tear-maiden" upon her, it "was the first word she spoke after her darkness". (S, 219)

Nienor Níniel's response to love is immediate, almost unthinking. No sooner does she see Turambar than she is emotionally committed to him, "she would not be parted from him." When Turambar goes out to fight the returned

Glauring, she is left behind, but as in Menegroth when her mother rode out, she could not remain behind.

Then Níniel being unable to endure her fear, and unwilling to wait in the Ephel tidings of Turambar's fortune, set forth after him, and a great company went with her. ... Brandir ... ought to dissuade her ... from this rashness. (S, 221)

The end of her story is tied to darkness and mad passion. When she hears the screams of the dragon as Turambar stabs him, she

sat and shuddered beside the falling water, and at the voice of Glauring her darkness crept upon her again, so that she could not stir from that place of her own will. (S, 222)

Shortly thereafter, she comes before the dying dragon, and he lifts his spell, telling her that her husband is the brother she had sought. Thinking Túrin dead, she refuses the comfort of Brandir, and

she ran from him distraught with horror and anguish, and coming to the brink of Cabed-en-Aras she cast herself over, and was lost in the wild water. (S, 223)

Passion, impetuous action, darkness: all trademarks of the Dark Heroine. As I observed earlier, Nienor is not described in *The Silmarillion*. However, when we turn to *Unfinished Tales*, Tolkien gives us some specific descriptions that seem to run counter to her function as a Dark Heroine. When she rides out disguised in the company from Menegroth, she is discovered by her mother.

'Whence came he?' she said. 'Thrice ten you came to me. Thrice ten and one you go ashore!'

Then the others turned, and saw that the sun shone upon a head of gold: for it was Nienor, and her hood was blown back by the wind. (UT, 15)

And later, after her death, Túrin tests Mablung regarding Nienor's history by describing her as brown, dark and small.

Then Mablung was amazed, and he said: 'But some mistake is here. Not such was your sister. She was tall, and her eyes were blue, her hair fine gold, the very likeness in woman's form of Húrin her father. ...' (UT, 144)

These two references are very specific, and, if we were to base a determination of Fair or Dark Heroine on coloring alone, Nienor, in *Unfinished Tales*, would be a Fair Heroine. But the whole of her story, as we have seen, suits the Dark Heroine.⁶

I think Tolkien's reasons for giving Nienor the fair coloring have less to do with her nature than it does with Túrin's own story. Túrin's first sister, whom he called Lalaith ("Laughter"), was golden-haired. In one of the notes for the *Narn i Hîn Húrin* in *Unfinished Tales*, Christopher Tolkien observed, "A marginal note in one text says here: 'Always he sought in all faces of women the face of Lalaith.'" (UT, 147) Although Túrin does not respond to the love of Finduilas, he does feel responsible for her, particularly for her death. When Nienor is found later, it is on the mound where Finduilas is buried.

... there came a great flash of lightning, so that the Haudh-en-Elleth was lit as with a white flame. Then Turambar who led the men started back and covered his eyes, and trembled; for it seemed that he saw the wraith of a slain maiden that lay upon the grave of Finduilas. (UT, 122)

Túrin, who is drawn toward golden-haired women, has found a golden-haired maiden in need on the grave of a golden-haired maiden he had failed to protect. He regards it as a favorable omen. It is these elements in the story which require Nienor to be a blonde, not the pattern of her behavior.

The Positive Heroines

Idril presents the positive version of the Fair Heroine. The first description of her comes in the story of Eöl and Maeglin in Gondolin.

Yet to none were his [Maeglin's] eyes more often drawn than to Idril the King's daughter, who sat beside him; for she was golden as the Vanyar, her mother's kindred, and she seemed to him as the sun from which all the King's hall drew its light. (S, 136)

She is a light-bearer in the court of her father, in a mountain citadel, a high place.

Idril is also wise and foreseeing. When Maeglin makes no move to support his father, and Eöl curses him, Idril is disturbed by it.

Then they cast Eöl over the Caragdûr, and so he ended, and to all in Gondolin it seemed just; but Idril was troubled, and from that day she mistrusted her kinsman. (S, 138)

Her insight and wisdom let her see further into Maeglin's thoughts. He desires her for her beauty and position

... without hope. The Eldar wedded not with kin so near, nor ever before had any desired to do so. And however that might be, Idril loved Maeglin not at all; and knowing his thought she loved him the less. For it seemed to her a thing strange and crooked in him (S, 139)

Indeed, her perception sees further than Maeglin's thoughts: she foresees the looming doom of Gondolin. And being an active heroine, she takes action to address what she can of that doom.

But Idril Celebrindal was wise and farseeing, and her heart misgave her, and foreboding crept upon her spirit as a cloud. Therefore in that time she let prepare a secret way, that should lead down from the city and passing out beneath the surface of the plain issue far beyond the walls, northward of Amon Gwareth; and she contrived it that the work was known but to few, and no whisper of it came to Maeglin's ears. (S, 241)

She puts her intelligence to the problem, conceives of a solution (even if it proves a partial solution), and acts on it.

Given the shortness of the texts concerning Gondolin, not much space is given to the romance of Tuor and Idril. In one concise passage, Tolkien draws the whole of it, including Maeglin's malevolence.

And Tuor remained in Gondolin Then the heart of Idril was turned to him, and his to her; and Maeglin's secret hatred grew ever greater, for he desired above all things to possess her, the only heir of the King of Gondolin. But so high did Tuor stand in the favour of the King that when he had dwelt there for seven years Turgon did not refuse him even the hand of his daughter

Then there was made a great and joyful feast, for Tuor had won the hearts of all that people, save only Maeglin and his secret following (S, 241)

Little else is said of the establishment of the relationship between Tuor and Idril. Two points in the passage can be used to highlight their courtship: that Tuor stands high in the favour of the King (after seven years service), and that he has won the hearts of all the people of Gondolin (except the sinister Maeglin and his followers). Tuor proves himself worthy of being loved, and so, of course, Idril loves him. Quite reasonable.

The fruit of Idril's perception and preparation is the salvation of a remnant of her people. When Maeglin's betrayal lets into Gondolin the forces of Morgoth, "Then Tuor and Idril led such remnants of the people of Gondolin as they could gather ... down the secret way which Idril had prepared" (S, 243)

Idril's insights and actions exemplify the rational intelligence that is the mark of the Fair Heroine. When we turn to study Lúthien, we are given a positive picture of the Dark Heroine in motion.

There is no doubt but that Lúthien is a Dark Heroine, at least in appearance. Tolkien's first description of her carries several deferences to darkness.

... for Lúthien was the most beautiful of all the Children of Ilúvatar. Blue was her raiment as the unclouded heaven, but her eyes were grey as the star-lit evening; her mantle was sewn with golden flowers, but her hair was dark as the shadows of twilight. As the light upon the leaves of trees, as the voice of clear waters, as the stars above the mists of the world, such was her glory and her loveliness; and in her face was a shining light. (S, 165)

Tolkien has taken several elements of darkness and presented them in positive terms. Blue, a color of darkness, is called a blue of "unclouded heaven". Her grey eyes belong to night, but specifically "the starlit evening". Her hair (inevitably) is dark, but "dark as the shadows of twilight." — not twilight itself, but the "shadows of twilight". Tolkien loads his references to darkness connected to Lúthien with these favorable qualities.

When Beren first sees Lúthien, she is dancing at night.

... he came upon Lúthien, daughter of Thingol and Melian, at a time of evening under moonrise, as she danced upon the unfading grass in the glades beside Esgalduin. (S, 165)

One might describe dance as emotion in motion. Certainly, both of these qualities, emotion and motion, are exemplified in Lúthien. When love comes upon her it is immediate, and once she has committed herself to love, all her actions are directed to support that bond.

Beren, after his first sight of Lúthien, after she flees him, has fallen in love with her. But he does not know where to find her or who she is: "In his heart he called her Tinúviel, that signifies nightingale, daughter of twilight, in the Greyelven tongue, for he knew no name for her." (S, 165) Thus, the Dark Heroine of Beren's tale is given the appropriate title of "daughter of twilight." When later he sees her again and calls after her, she responds to that name, and falls completely in love.

... he called to her, crying Tinúviel; and the woods echoed the name. Then she halted in wonder, and fled no more, and Beren came to her. But as she looked on him, doom fell upon her, and she loved him (S, 165)

Her commitment to this love is unshakable, even in the face of her father's displeasure.

Beren and Lúthien were betrayed to Thingol by an elf who loved her (there are echoes here of Maeglin's desire for Idril). Thingol

spoke in grief and amazement to Lúthien; but she would reveal nothing, until he swore an oath to her that he would neither slay Beren nor imprison him. But he sent his servants to lay hands on him and lead him to Menegroth as a malefactor; and Lúthien forestalling them led Beren herself before the throne of Thingol, as if he were an honored guest. (S, 66)

She acts upon her emotions, but her actions are always to the assistance of the loved one, not simply undirected emotional action.

Thingol, thinking to get rid of an unwanted suitor for his daughter, names a Silmaril as the brideprice for Lúthien. Beren, being in love, departs to achieve that brideprice. Lúthien, left behind, falls silent, "and from that hour she sang not again in Doriath". (S, 168) When news is received that Beren has been captured by Sauron, Thingol confines his daughter to keep her from going to the man's rescue. She, however, escapes, calling upon all her powers as a Dark Heroine. She "caused her hair to grow to great length, and of it she wove a dark robe that wrapped her beauty like a shadow, and it was laden with a spell of sleep." (S, 172) "Shrouded in her shadowy cloak" (S, 172), she vanishes from Doriath and embarks on a series of adventures all directed to rescuing and joining Beren on his quest. Celegorm's desire to possess her, and Sauron's desire to defeat her do not stop her. Acquiring the help of Huan the hound, she rescues Beren and they journey even into Morgoth's hall. There, once again, she acts from her domain of dark:

Then suddenly she eluded his sight, and out of the shadows began a song of such surpassing loveliness, and of such blinding power, that he listened perforce; and a blindness came upon him (S, 180)

He crashes down under the spell, and we are presented with the picture of the Dark Lord brought down by the Daughter of Twilight.

— This tremendous act is the climax of a chain of events

brought to this end by Lúthien's unwavering commitment to her love. After Beren is rescued from Sauron, he tries to persuade her to return to Menegroth.

But she was not willing to be parted from him again, saying: 'You must choose, Beren, between these two: to relinquish the quest and your oath and seek a life of wandering upon the face of the earth; or to hold to your word and challenge the power of darkness upon its throne. But on either road I shall go with you, and our doom shall be alike.' (S, 177)

Even after this declaration, Beren tries to leave her in safety as he pursues the quest, but she again follows him. "Then Beren perceived that Lúthien could not be divided from the doom that lay upon them both, and he sought no longer to dissuade her." (S, 179)

So strong is her commitment to this love that even after Beren has died, her love holds him until she comes to the Halls of Mandos. Her ability to express that love is so powerful that "Mandos was moved to pity, who never before was so moved, nor has been since." (S, 187) In winning the pity of the Valar, she wins the choice of mortal life shared with Beren for a time in Middle-earth, and that is the choice she makes. A case, perhaps, of immortality well lost for love.

Conclusion

There are parallels between both versions of the Fair and Dark Heroines. Nienor no sooner sees Turambar than she loves him. Lúthien's response may not be so immediate, for she does flee Beren initially, but as soon as he calls her Tinúviel, she too succumbs to that immediate love. Both Finduilas and Idril are daughters of kings, and are described as light-bearers, Finduilas likened to sun on water and Idril as the source of light in her father's hall.

However, the differences between the positive and negative versions of the Heroines are also clear. Where all of Lúthien's emotion (i.e., love) driven actions are directed toward assisting Beren, Nienor's are simply driven. Where Idril lays plans and takes action based on her perceptions, Finduilas does nothing. Where the Heroines take action to assist their hero, as do Lúthien and Idril, there is a positive result in the course of events. Where the Heroines do not take action, or where (as with Nienor) such action is not directed as support for the hero, the results are tragic. Tolkien's Fair and Dark Heroines show greater depth than the types described by Robert Rogers. Tolkien does not accept that the Dark Heroine must *ipso facto* be a negative force, nor does he require that the Fair Heroine have an entirely positive part in the tale.

Light and reason, darkness and emotion. Tolkien uses these traditional archetypes and gives them additional depth by showing that both archetypes are capable of positive and negative versions.

Notes

1. "Mythopoesis", Sarah Beach, *Mythlore* 43, p. 3.
2. *The Double in Literature*, Robert Rogers, Wayne State University Press:

Detroit: 1970, p. 126.

3. *Fables of Identity*, Northrop Frye, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.: New York: 1963, p. 59.
4. *The Silmarillion*, J.R.R. Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston: 1977, p. 209-210. Hereafter cited in the text as S.
5. *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth*, J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston: 1980, p. 157. Hereafter cited in the text as UT. Because material in *Unfinished Tales* presents a fuller picture of Tolkien's intention for the story, particularly in relation to the matter of Túrin and those about him, I felt it necessary to refer to that work. It became quite pertinent in dealing with the matter of Nienor, as will be seen shortly.
6. It has been a fairly consistent response on the part of artists to draw Nienor as dark-haired. As Paul DiSante observed to me, it is difficult to picture a passionate tragic heroine as being fair-haired. The archetype at work.
7. Having dealt with Tolkien's blondes and brunettes, I should note that there seem to be no red-heads in Middle-earth. Usually, a redhead would fit most of the qualities of the Dark Heroine. A good article which touches somewhat on the contributions of a red-headed heroine is Verlyn Flieger's "The Man Who Loved Women" on E.R. Eddison.

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